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Published online: 01 Jul 2020.

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Hegemonic masculinities after forced migration: Exploring relational performances of Syrian refugee men in The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Masculinities research has started to disentangle the gendered challenges men face after forced migration. This paper aims to contribute to this emerging work by exploring constructions of masculinities of young Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands. It builds on the accounts of twenty-two Syrian men between nineteen and thirty-five years old whose experiences were explored using in-depth interviews and walking interviews. Our respondents construct masculinities predominantly in relation to labour market access, paid work and perceived social status, however, meanings of masculinities are differentiated by age, social class, race, and religion. Hence, we illustrate how respondents use personal biographies and generational narratives to shape these masculinities in relation to a restrictive host society. We find that older, higher educated respondents shape masculinities in relation to status loss and unrealised aspirations emphasised by experiences of racialisation and marginalisation in the local labour market. We go on to argue that younger respondents, who did not obtain any higher education due to the civil war, seem more flexible in finding work. As a result, they are able to maintain more traditional breadwinner masculinities, masculinities they use to counter societal narratives in the Netherlands concerning Muslim men. Last, we demonstrate how these generational differences affect perceptions and performances of masculinities in relation to gender, generational relations and life course advancement. The paper emphasises masculinities of young refugee Syrian men in the Netherlands as geographical and temporal constructions, remaining highly nuanced, plural and contextual.

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Introduction

Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands struggle to find long-term paid employment in the Netherlands, and increasingly articulate concerns about working flexible or part-time, underpaid jobs (Dagevos et al. 2018). Despite eagerness to get to work after years of liminality in consequence of war and being on the move, only a small share of Syrian men in the Netherlands managed to find employment thus far. Many are unable to obtain or hold a paid job due to a loss of human capital. Consequently, they feel caught up in integration procedures that fail to properly address issues such as Dutch language improficiency, diploma devaluation and the absence of social networks needed to navigate the Dutch labour market (Dagevos et al. 2018; Huizinga and van Hoven 2018). Additionally, in trying to access the Dutch labour market, they face a labour market that structurally racialises and marginalises Muslim migrants (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018; Siebers 2017). This is frustrating as, in the absence of a welfare state in Syria, for men in this study work was imperative to provide financial security in Syria, and demanded creativity and determination in search of job opportunities (e.g. Suerbaum 2018; Gerami 2005).

Recent work on masculinities highlights how gender identities of migrants are intertwined with unemployment, and the gendered status that were lost in the event of migration (Charsley and Wray 2015). Kleist (2010), for example, scrutinises the perceptions of Somali men and women with the Danish welfare state. She illustrates how life on social welfare benefits strengthens narratives of adaptability in the new host country among Somali women, whereas in such circumstances men are described as having lost social status. Suerbaum (2018) notes efforts by Syrian men in Egypt to restore former idealised patriarchal notions of masculinities in relation to femininities in order to cope with such status loss. However, re-defining manhood after forced migration is not a linear process as it is subject to the specificities and uncertainties embedded in one's personal biography as well as the social and physical context of an often restrictive host society.

As a masculine rite of passage, migration is often defined as 'a liminal phase before the acquisition of a new status or identity' (Charsley and Wray 2015, 407). But migrant men, like our respondents, do not enter a new host society 'bereft of notions about their own manliness' (Donaldson and Howson 2009, 210). Their masculinities are part of a hierarchical structure, formed not only by interactions between masculinities and femininities, but defined through relations of oppression between men as well (Connell 2005a). Hegemonic masculinity embodies 'the currently most honoured form of being a man', a normative form of being man in relation to which all men need to position themselves (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). On migrant men, Donaldson and Howson (2009, 210) note 'there is very little

evidence to indicate what happens to their sense of hegemonic masculinity and whether it is eroded and fortified by their active engagement in migration and resettlement.'

This paper explores how young Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands shape and negotiate constructions of masculinities, i.e. how is manhood perceived and what is expected of men? To negotiate the broad field of masculinities research, this paper starts by exploring current debates within geographies of masculinities, followed by a contextualisation of masculinities in relation to forced migration. Subsequently, we introduce the respondents, the research context and methodological implications of studying masculinities, hegemony and marginalisation among Syrian refugee men. We then proceed by highlighting the complex relationships between masculinities, space and power: First, we discuss experiences of downward mobility by older respondents who obtained higher education in Syria, and illustrate that these experiences reflect marginalised and racialised constructions of masculinities in the context of the Netherlands. Second, we argue that younger respondents feel more empowered to engage with the local labour market, encouraged by a breadwinner mentality they developed in an effort to provide financial security during the hardships of war in Syria. Lastly, we illustrate the importance of these different experiences in relation to age by exploring how masculinities are re-defined in relation to gender, generational relations and life course advancement. The paper closes with a discussion to recapitulate the challenges Syrian men face after forced migration and to emphasise its contribution to better understand Syrian masculinities in forced displacement as contextual and unstable performances.

Men, manhood and relational masculinities

To address gendered challenges experienced by Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands, we position this paper within the feminist social and cultural geography literature given its emphasis on gender, power and space (e.g. Berg and Longhurst 2003; Hopkins and Noble 2009; van Hoven and Hörschelmann 2005). Feminist geographers have contributed to spatial analyses of migration, and have emphasised how places shape and are shaped, at least in part, as a result of gender, race, class and other social positions (Silvey 2006). These analyses owe much to Jackson's (1991) seminal work on the cultural politics of masculinities. By conceptualising masculinities as social constructions, infused with temporal and geographical subjectivities, Jackson convincingly argued that masculinities must be understood as plural. More recently, feminist geographies have been intertwined with increasing work on the geographies of masculinities (Berg and Longhurst 2003; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins, 2014), highlighting the role of different localities and

places in how constructions of masculinities are shaped, negotiated and contested (Berg and Longhurst 2003; van Hoven and Hörschelmann 2005).

Van Hoven, Huizinga, and Hopkins (2020) further describe masculinities as both an identity and an ideology; masculinity 'is also extended in the world, merged in organised social relations' (Connell 2005a, 29). Indeed, at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is considered culturally exalted (Connell 2005a). Although Connell's work has been highly influential to understand masculinities as a web of power hierarchies, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been criticised for being static and monolithic. Consequently, recent studies have approached masculinities as lived relations, characterised by complexity, ambiguity and contradiction (Hopkins 2006; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014; McDowell 2002a). To identify, structure and negotiate these lived social relations in the field of masculinities research, this paper further conceptualises masculinities as relational achievements (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014). As social constructions, masculinities have been defined 'in relation to other entities, including bodies, identities, institutions, ideas, social norms and categories, and historical and geographical contexts' (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014, 6).

To explore relational masculinities, then, researchers have focused on life trajectories and societal change, not in particular in studies on perceptions of downward mobility in forced displacement (Kleist 2010; Suerbaum 2018). Masculinities research emphasises the relationships between the transition to work, class and gender. McDowell's research, for example, emphasises a resurgence of class-based masculinities due to economic and social change in the context of labour market restructuring (2002b). Working class men's transition to manhood is increasingly questioned (McDowell 2002b; Nayak 2006) and, in order to find new ways of becoming man, some authors point out that men desire and perform alternative strategies to recover hegemonic forms of manhood (see, for example, Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014; McDowell 2000). In an increasingly globalising world, 'where place makes the most difference to the least qualified young people' (Roberts 1995, 45), global processes and everyday politics of masculinities become ever more linked. Connell (1998, 2005b), for example, employed the idea of 'transnational business masculinity' to describe a 'world gender order' legitimised by elite transnational businessmen. In relation to global, economic change, Ward et al. (2017), on the other hand, describe men performing safe masculinities in reaction to their changing local contexts to secure their futures. Similarly, Gorman-Murray and Hopkins (2014) highlight the masculine trajectory as an agentic process by conceptualising masculinities as 'strategic accomplishments', performances of manhood as practiced in a particular social context (9, emphasis in original).

Middle Eastern masculinities and forced displacement

It has been argued masculinities research has reached a critical mass (Hopkins 2006, 2007), but the explicit relation between men and masculinities in the context of forced migration has emerged only recently within the scientific debate (Charsley and Wray 2015). Forced displacement tends to disrupt established constructions of masculinities developed in the country of origin (Charsley and Wray 2015; Kleist 2010; Suerbaum 2018). As relational and plural achievements, the masculinities of Syrian refugee men are influenced by the complexities of becoming man in the social and cultural pre-migration context of Syria and the Middle East. Masculinities in the Middle East are in a constant state of flux and are increasingly marked by opportunity, risk and uncertainty (Gökariksel and Secor 2017; Inhorn 2012). They have become more and more intertwined with the world, and are balancing between 'globalisation, cultural liberation, Islamic fundamentalism, and democracy, to name a few' (Gerami 2005, 450). Indeed, Amar (2011) argues that 'real' Middle Eastern men challenge traditional forms of 'moralised, criminalised, racialised and colonial masculinities' as these are 'the most popular subjects of modern geopolitical hypervisibility' (40; see also Hopkins 2006). In an effort to challenge these popular subjects, Ghannam (2013) points out the largely unexplored socio-economic disparities within states in relation to multiple and contradicting masculinities in the Middle East.

Indeed, various authors have argued that constructions of masculinities in the Middle East evolve around perceived life opportunities and a desire for social mobility under the influence of socio-economic and political instability (Gerami 2005; Ghannam 2013; Inhorn 2012). Due to ongoing conflict, at least in part, working-class men struggle daily to provide for their family, often work long hours or are forced to work physically demanding jobs (Ghannam 2013). Gerami (2005) argued many men cannot adopt a breadwinner role, and increasingly decide to migrate for education or to find employment. Regardless this job poverty, Suerbaum (2018) maintains traditional models of masculinities in the Middle East remain accentuated by stable employment, job status and social class. In particular upper-middle class men perpetuate a favourable societal position by maintaining 'a life of consumerism and meaningful work', bearing economic capital to cope with inflation, unresponsive governments and corruption (Amar 2011; Gerami 2005, 453). Despite these general masculine representations in the Middle East, Suerbaum (2018), however, illustrates that masculinities of displaced Syrian men remain multiple, unpredictable and at times contradictory.

Lastly, in researching representations of such plural masculinities, various authors have considered men's bodies as a means to challenge or subvert hegemonic masculinities in different contexts. In the context of our research, Ghannam's (2013) writing is of interest as she highlights the importance of a

well-groomed appearance for Middle Eastern men to mask personal struggles, such as financial indigence. Similarly, Barber (2015) describes how Vietnamese young men actively negotiate invisibility consequential to the effeminising effect of Orientalism through specific types of hairstyling, dress and behaviour. As embodiments of gender identity and behaviour, masculine bodies have traditionally been considered as emotionally restrained, resilient and closed (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014). However, in a response to hegemonic masculinities, men increasingly seem to enact alternative masculinities that appreciate and are appreciated for showing vulnerability, emotions and care (Gökariksel and Secor 2017; Inhorn 2012). As such the male body, and the production of physical capital, are intrinsically linked with class preferences (Shilling 2003). Working class men more often use their bodies as a means to exchange physical capital for economic capital (Shilling 2003), or, as argued by Nayak (2003), men aim to achieve a bodily capital that was once associated with hard manual labour, but is still recognised as meaningful in particular contexts.

In the context of many Western European states, then, Muslim bodies are often rendered as 'other' (Ghorashi 2014; Hopkins 2006, 2007). Hopkins (2006) argues that the masculinities of young Muslim men are inextricably linked with religion and race, and, driven by societal discourses on Islamophobia or the 'refugee crisis', are frequently associated with deviance and violence. Muslim men's embodied integrity is challenged through experiences and encounters of everyday racism, that being modes of thought which construct the body for ideological purposes. By considering experiences of Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands, this paper seeks to contribute to the geographies of masculinities as experiences of religious and racialised young men remain marginalised within geography literature (Hopkins 2007).

Researching masculinities after forced migration

This paper draws on the accounts of twenty-two young Syrian men in the Netherlands who currently hold a temporary residence permit. Data were collected during sit-down interviews and walking interviews between July 2018 and October 2018. Respondents were approached with the help of local public benefit organisations and the Dutch Council for Refugees Northern Netherlands, and using snowball sampling within the existing network of the principal researcher. Due to the author's lack of Arabic language proficiency, the interviews were conducted in Dutch or English. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised by the authors. Respondents consented to be present in the paper using fictional names, chosen either by themselves or by the authors. In some cases, and without changing meaning, quotes in the paper were 'polished' in order to avoid

confronting respondents unnecessarily with their Dutch or English language improficiency. In doing so, we used the 'domesticating translation' approach following Venuti (2000).

The age of respondents ranged between nineteen and thirty-five. All were heterosexual men. Fourteen respondents were single and lived alone, five were living together with their partner and/or children, and three lived with their parents. Most respondents self-identified as Muslims, or with specific denominations within Islam, and two as Christians. The extent to which religion was practiced varied greatly among our respondents, and seemed to be independent of age, class or rural/urban background. Most grew up in urban regions such as Aleppo, Damascus and Deir ez-Zor, four respondents have a rural background. Those between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age had mostly obtained a university degree and often worked high-income jobs in Syria. Those younger than twenty-five could not enter or graduate from university due to the war and often worked in construction industry or retailing in Syria, most were nevertheless raised in middle-class families. The qualifications used in this paper are based on Nuffic's (the Dutch organisation of internationalisation in education) assessment of the Syrian education system. The qualifications show respondents' highest completed level of education in Syria, which varies between basic education (EQF level 2), general secondary education (EQF level 4) and a master's degree (EQF level 7). The distribution among respondents in this study are in line with findings by Dagevos et al. (2018), who observe the social backgrounds of Syrians in the Netherlands to be skewed towards middle-class and higher educated groups.

All respondents were allocated living space by the government in the social housing context of the Northern Netherlands as a consequence of refugee dispersal policy, fourteen in its largest city Groningen, eight in surrounding villages and medium sized towns. The Northern Netherlands is a region traditionally home to a white population, although the international student city of Groningen is becoming more ethnically diverse. Still, both region and city lack culture-specific amenities and mostly represents traditional Dutch culture (see also Huizinga and van Hoven 2018). The region can be further characterised as a rural area focused on agriculture and manufacturing, suffering from a relatively high structural unemployment rate. Although not yet observed among Syrian refugees, research on other refugee cohorts demonstrates migration intentions to the more diverse Randstad area (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, etc.) as a consequence of marginalisation in the North and perceived labour market opportunities in the West (Dagevos et al. 2018). Lastly, the Dutch integration programme forms an additional barrier towards effective labour market integration due to its focus on language and citizenship training. However, a new Dutch law

on integration will be installed in 2021, emphasising employment and income in a more integral approach to refugee integration.

All interviews were conducted by the principal researcher and followed a structure with open-ended and follow-up questions themed around concepts of place attachment, belonging and participation. Hence, masculinities initially were not the focus of the interviews, but rather emerged throughout the data collection phase as the principal researcher remained sensitive to the emergence of new experiences and attitudes respondents thought important (Longhurst 2010). Indeed, following Connell (2005a), gender identities are shaped and negotiated in the mundane lives of individuals, and societal expectations of gender expressions are reinforced in almost every area of life; masculinity, therefore, was interwoven with the experiences, views and opinions of (male) respondents regarding the initial interview guide topics. As an interview design should be dynamic throughout the research (Dunn 2000), we tailored the interview guide to fit our aim of exploring Syrian refugee masculinities as the study progressed.

Transcription and data analysis were conducted coincidentally by the principal researcher. Transcripts of the different interviews as well as field notes from respondent observations were analysed in NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Following Hjälm (2014), thematic narrative analysis method was deemed best given the circumstances of respondents and seemed suitable to interpret 'the intimate details of experiences, attitudes and reflections to the broader social and spatial relations of which they are a part' (Wiles, Rosenberg, and Kearns 2005, 98). The analysis focused on identifying recurrent dimensions through which masculinities are experienced and performed by respondents, and to reveal the similarities and differences that form these dimensions (Hjälm 2014). Moreover, language issues and cultural differences sometimes led to uncertainty about the precise stories of respondents, bringing about challenges to scrutinise and interpret their content. Being sensitive to the narrative of respondents helped to remain closer to the meanings that respondents attach to their everyday lives and to capture the complexities, the 'fluid, situated and negotiated nature' of the research encounter (Hopkins and Noble 2009, 817–818).

Consequently, the narratives provided by men in this study were analysed as those by displaced Syrian men in the Netherlands, reinforcing and renegotiating masculinities influenced by intersections of age, social class, religion and race (Hopkins 2006). Hence, in the context of our paper, it is important to highlight researcher positionality. The principal researcher, Rik, is white male, Dutch, fits the same age category as our respondents and is currently pursuing a PhD at a Dutch University. During the research, Rik experienced some social markers of difference were more subtle (age and gender), whereas others (citizenship, race and religion) remained more potent (see also Hopkins 2006). Despite clear positions of privilege, the researcher's

position as being insider or outsider shifted during the research encounter based on the topic of discussion. Throughout the data collection, analysis and writing process, the researcher remained reflexive and critical towards interpretations of the data as well as the research encounter itself (see Kapinga, Huizinga, and Shaker 2019 on collective reflexive practice). At first, respondents seemed hesitant to talk freely about their attitudes and feelings in a man-to-man interview; Hegemonic men are generally not supposed to admit to strangers that their life is 'like being in jail' (Connell 2000, 71). Between men, it proved difficult to talk about status loss, discrimination, religion and recovering agency, especially for those who had experienced fall back in their transition to manhood. By emphasising their expertise on, for example, religion, their studies or their own neighbourhood by means of a walking interview, respondents were provided means to shape the research and to balance power structures during the research encounter.

Gender, generation and war

Our data suggest the respondents' constructions of masculinities are strongly tied to the local labour market of the Northern Netherlands, and the perceived opportunities and conflict that result from being (un)employed. Their masculinities are geographically and temporally contingent, and the men's approaches to shape, negotiate and enact manhood vary accordingly. Understandings and experiences of masculinities seem particularly affected by the personal biographies of our respondents, and contrasts emerge between different generations of respondents. The different experiences between age groups emphasise the lingering disruptive effects of the 2011 civil war in the lives of refugee Syrian men in the Netherlands.

In order to navigate what kind of men Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands ought to be, this section discusses three different themes. First, we demonstrate how older respondents, who obtained higher education, define hegemonic masculinity in relation to employment, educational and social status, but are confronted in the Netherlands with unemployment and social status loss under the refugee label. We go on to demonstrate how younger respondents, who did not follow higher education due to the civil war, adhere to more traditional ideals of masculinities, and appear more flexible and creative in entering the Dutch labour market. Last, we argue that men of different age groups define and maintain different constructions of hegemonic masculinities in relation to women, femininities and family.

'Here [in The Netherlands]. I am suddenly not capable of anything'

As other migrant men, the Syrian refugee men currently residing in the Netherlands carry with them strongly embedded constructions of

masculinities established in the country of origin (Donaldson and Howson, 2009). For respondents between twenty-five and thirty-five, constructions of masculinities are, to a large extent, influenced by employment, job status and associated social class distinctions (Gerami 2005; Inhorn 2012). This section explores constructions of hegemonic masculinity in relation to perceived labour market exclusion in the Netherlands. We illustrate how older respondents are challenged in their masculinities due to perceived status loss and engage in practices of othering to demarcate themselves. We consider how respondents feel their adulthood is questioned as they need to go back to university or work unsteady and underpaid jobs. Lastly, we argue that masculinities in the Netherlands are negotiated by respondents in relation to global hegemonic masculinity.

Respondents' current everyday life situations in the Netherlands are characterised by liminal spaces, and seem far removed from the pre-migration social context and the desired forms of masculinities embedded within these contexts. Throughout the interviews, our respondents repeatedly emphasised their status as highly educated professionals, either working and living in international communities in Syria, or going abroad to study or to find employment. All seemed (and are still) very career driven; they were able to navigate paucity of employment opportunities and diminishing traditional pathways of becoming man in Syria as described before (Gerami 2005; Ghannam 2013). Hence, for these respondents, constructions of masculinities flow from their achievements, job status and career paths, and, therefore, adhere to a hegemonic masculinity predominantly shaped and defined by employment and the willingness to provide financial security for the family through labour (Connell 2000; McDowell 2002a). Indeed, when Wasim (31) was asked what defines him as a man, he mentioned his career path. He explains,

> It is very difficult to study law in Syria. I performed really well, I got really high grades. Performing well was the reason I pursued a master in the first place, I wanted to become a lawyer. But. yeah. then, when the war started, I had to flee and I left my master behind. (Wasim, 31, single, master's degree)

In the Netherlands, Wasim's master certificate from Syria is not recognised as such. The complexity behind validating the educational programmes of refugees not only causes a disruption in the labour market integration process, it is often experienced differently by men and women (Bucken-Knapp, Fakih, and Spehar 2019). Men, like our respondents, feel challenged in their sense of masculinity as their educational and professional achievements are not recognised or acknowledged. In the Netherlands, they feel unable to fulfil their duties as men, whereas, in their specific social environment in Syria, job and social status clearly defined them as man. Riad (34), for example, earned well as a computer systems engineer in Dubai and organised his lifestyle

accordingly. He says: 'I was pouring water from golden taps, one instant later I was here, looking for furniture in a second-hand shop'.

Higher educated respondents seem to define their own position as certain type of men by establishing a hierarchy that rests on educational and professional achievements, and social status, in particular in relation to men working manual labour jobs (see also Kleist 2010). Indeed, Baker (2017) highlight the importance of identifying the moral meanings of young people's aspirations and future plans in relation to what sort of person they think they are or would like to become. Older respondents seem 'to masculinise themselves' (665) by drawing up borders between themselves and other (Syrian) uneducated or technical skilled refugee men, similar to practices of othering found among Syrian refugee men in Egypt (Suerbaum 2018). These practices follow frustration about the perceived disruption in their career advancement, but also resonate with studies that claim ruptures within the hierarchy of masculinities caused by a loss of secure manufacturing jobs, explicitly emphasising more appreciation towards some men compared to others (McDowell 2002a; Nayak 2006; Ward et al. 2017). Consequently, respondents experience downward mobility as everyday life confronts them with a loss of social status. Municipalities in the Netherlands are responsible for moving refugees from welfare to work, but often employ different procedures. Some invest in labour market integration courses or an education, whereas other municipalities' tend to push refugees towards lower educated jobs. Hamzah and Wasim, for example, explain:

> I had an appointment with somebody from the municipality of [name of place] and he said: 'Hamzah, we cannot find a suitable position for you, can't you do something else? For example, driving a cab, or cleaning?' I was like: 'Are you for real? Is this serious? Why?' That gave me a really negative feeling. This was about me. I am an architect, I studied for six years at the university. I worked as a project manager in Saudi Arabia, but here I am suddenly not capable of anything! (Hamzah, 31, single, master's degree)

> Going to the university consumes a lot of effort […] But yeah, am I going to work? Where can I find work, what can I do? Delivery, kitchen, shoemaker. But I received high quality education in Syria […] I can work now, maybe earn more money than my allowance. No, I need to study first for a couple years, although it is difficult to make this decision. (Wasim, 31, single, master's degree)

Although university seems the way back to their prior degree and associated status, Wasim and Hamzah do not seem eager to return as both feel they passed this phase of their life trajectory. In relation to labour market changes and employment, Nayak (2006) describes the transition of young men to adulthood, i.e. from boyhood to manhood, as a 'transition from peer-group networks and formal education to the world of work' (815). The quotes above illustrates that respondents feel they made the transition into

manhood in Syria, but due to war and forced migration are being thrown back into the uncertainty that is part of being young adult (McDowell 2002b). Hady (35), another respondent, quit his pre-master studies in architecture, emphasising 'I finished my studies eleven years ago, I don't want to go to school with eighteen- and nineteen year olds anymore. I already know all these things'. Similar to Hamzah, he practiced his job as an architect for several years. Being an architect was part of his adult, male identity, and is therefore fundamental to assert masculinity opposed to the 'boys' he is supposed to go to class with in the Netherlands.

The personal biographies of these respondents contrast their current lives in the Netherlands that are in many ways restrictive (see also Dagevos et al. 2018; Huizinga and van Hoven 2018). Based on the pre-migration accounts, they seemed to thrive in Syria as narrators of their own lives. Accounts of downward mobility are a common observation among men in forced displacement (e.g. Kleist 2010; Suerbaum 2018), but the accounts of our respondents imply a deeper layer of status that was lost. In Syria, many older respondents pursued a type of hegemonic masculinity, inspired by hedonism and individualism (see also Connell 2005b; Gerami 2005), and seemed to desire a form of masculinity that resembles Connell's (1998) notion of 'Western transnational business masculinity'. 'We are not that much different from you', Hady often mentioned during the interview as he explained how he and his friends 'grew up watching Western culture',

> For me, my view has always been outside of Syria. Syria is a third-world country to me and *we* in Syria always look at better countries. Culture in Western Europe is better, exalted compared to Syrian culture. We grew up watching English television and were taught European history in school. To us, this was how we wanted to live. To live the same life as you. (Hady, 35, in a relationship, master's degree)

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that in lower-income countries, globalisation fuels new gender orders in regional and local contexts. Coming from cities as Damascus, Aleppo, or Deir ez-Zor, instead of traditional notions of masculinities, the respondents judged manhood in relation to strong work ethics, upholding liberty as a core principle, and possessing great technological and communicational skills (see also Connell 1998). In part, this more cosmopolitan attitude convinced them to go to Western Europe, whereas they could have gone to Syria's neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey. For many, the pre-migration expectations and perceptions about Western European societies, such as the Netherlands, were in line with their personal aspirations and the specific meanings attached to these aspirations (see also Baker 2017). Paradoxically, these aspirations that brought them to Western Europe, seem to problematise their manhood in the Netherlands due to the loss of employment and status.

Connell's (1998) notion of a *European* transnational business masculinity implies racial identities as well since it assumes whiteness. In aspiring such hegemonic masculinity in Syria, our respondents did not encounter any implications because of not being white. They were able to manoeuver the social and cultural structures of hegemonic men, because their social class position was able to neutralise their skin colour. However, race and racism become more prominent at the moment respondents are trying to find and redefine masculinity in the Netherlands. Being stripped from privileges afforded though citizenship and social class privileges, they encounter an integration procedure that systematically tends to associate Middle-Eastern Muslim migrants with poor socio-economic prospects (Bonjour and Duijvendak 2018). Many of our respondents feel misrecognised, as public and political discourse seems to label them as having a lower education, maintaining poor work ethics and holding oppressive gender and family norms. The men's marginalised position in the Netherlands therefore seems a complex configuration of age, race, religion and social class.

The constructions of masculinities discussed in this section are specific for the respondents in this age group. The civil war seems to have left a different impact on the masculinities of younger respondents, those between nineteen and twenty-five. Due to the war these men were unable to study or work, i.e. to advance towards adulthood. In the next section, we highlight how Syrian refugee men in this age group shape and negotiate masculinities by actively engaging with local labour market opportunities and obstacles.

'It's not my dream job, but I need to start making money'

Respondents between nineteen and twenty-five years old generally spoke less about downward mobility, and seemed more proactive and creative in their efforts to engage with the labour market and to cope with refugee status. For them, the local conditions in Syria as a consequence of the civil war seem important in defining masculinities in the Netherlands, opposed to global hegemonic forms of male respectability discussed above. Due to the war, many younger respondents could not enter a working life phase as described by older respondents in the previous section. Here, we highlight how respondents maintain constructions of masculinities formed in the context of the Syrian civil war. We illustrate how respondents use these masculinities to actively negotiate the Dutch regional labour market, in the case of many of our respondents the construction sector. We argue that respondents produce physical capital on the one hand to stay competitive for the labour market, and on the other as exchange capital to camouflage economic hardship and to counter societal narratives concerning the Muslim male body.

When the civil war broke out in Syria, many respondents had to contribute to the household income of their family. Most interrupted their studies to start working manual labour jobs in order earn money and provide for their family. Some went abroad to find employment in, for example, Turkey, Iraq or Lebanon. Abbas, for example, found work as a welder in Iraq. He emphasises that,

> Nobody knew that there would be a war in Syria. Me, and also all the other boys in Syria, we were in school. Back then, we had our own dream, a dream to maybe become a dentist, maybe a doctor, or maybe even an architect [...] I. I went to Iraq in 2012. At the time I was seventeen years old. So I didn't go to school anymore, I didn't study anymore. All schools in Syria were closed, or they were opened, but nobody went to school anymore. Because it was too dangerous. (Abbas, 23, single, basic education)

Moaz (21) shares a similar experience, he reflects on how being employed at a young age has changed his attitudes towards life. He says,

> I started working since I was thirteen years old [...] when I was fourteen I was working and fixing heavy machine parts. Because of this kind of work, I always needed to work, not having fun with other children [...] so I think I learned then what life means, and how I can take care of myself. (Moaz, 21, single, basic education)

During the civil war, priority for the respondents became to work and provide for their family. Regardless of the younger respondents' background, more traditional scripts for gender roles were re-established in relation to work and care, enforced by the war; for many of our respondents, women and children stayed at home, and men had to find work. In the Netherlands, then, the same respondents seem more flexible in relation to the labour market. At the time of interviewing, between July and October 2018, the building and construction sector was growing in the Netherlands, but suffered from a dearth of skilled workers. Three out of ten respondents found work in construction. Described as unacceptable masculine employment by older respondents in the previous section, manual labour seems important to define masculinity for the younger men in our study as an earned income reminds them of their role as men developed during the civil war.

The civil war significantly affected younger respondents' transition to manhood, making them eager to recover the time they lost due to the war. Furthermore, family members and friends, especially those remaining in Middle Eastern countries, frequently confront respondents with questions regarding marriage or family planning, emphasising respondents should have moved past certain life events given their age. To enter the phase of marriage or family planning, a steady income is key (Inhorn 2012). Indeed, particularly for young Muslim men involved in the process of becoming man, paid labour seems crucial in developing a masculine identity (Hopkins

[2006](). For our respondents, then, working in construction is an interesting option to counter the questions that cast doubt on their sense of masculinity. Sulaiman (23) describes how he was able to convince friends to start working in construction. He mentions,

> I wanted them to stop their allowance [welfare benefits] and move on to a mature life. So, I told them come join me, you can get a lot of money from this job. It's a heavy job, but you can build your life […] I wanted to take them out of this circle and let them move into a new life. I did motivate them by buying a scooter and later I got a car. They saw my life getting better, so all of them were like 'give us a job too!' (Sulaiman, 23, single, basic education)

'It's a heavy job', Sulaiman refers to the impact of construction work on the body. He and other respondents work out frequently to keep their body in shape, and to maintain physical strength and endurance. Following Shilling ([2003](), 'the management and development of the body is central *in its own right* to human capital in general, and to the production of cultural and economic capital and the attainment of and maintenance of status' (654, emphasis in original). Respondents produce embodied capital, and thereby make use of specific places. Rifat, for example, mentions,

> Look, this is the place [the outdoor gym] I was talking about. I can do my exercises here. It is very easy, because it is close to my house. A lot of people use this, also a lot of my neighbours. In the summer, I go to the beach more in the south of the city. We play football, but also there are places to do fitness […] it's important to have a good body, to be strong, in my company we work hard and really long every day. (Rifat, 22, single, basic education, walking interview)

The quote implies respondents make strategic use of their body to convert physical capital into economic capital (Shilling [2003]()). Taking advantage of local labour market opportunities, the respondents can adhere to models of masculinities they perceive desirable. At the same time, the body represents a symbolic value in specific social contexts. As Nayak ([2003]()) shows, men employ a muscular body as a 'corporeal curriculum' (156) to enact conventional masculinities that are traditionally linked to manual labour, but still symbolise hegemonic masculinity in local contexts. We mentioned respondents are in a life stage where certain steps are required in relation to manhood, often pointed out by family members and friends. Producing physical capital seems a strategy to divert the attention away from the respondents' incapability to meet expectation and desires regarding their masculinity, i.e. to own economic capital. Physical capital therefore serves as exchange capital in a way to enact respectable masculinity by means of their body (Nayak [2003](); Shilling [2003]()).

The Muslim body, however, is not uncontested in the Dutch context and is often rendered as the 'other' in public space (Ghorashi [2014]()). The current Dutch social and political climate increasingly marginalises Middle Eastern men, making a scapegoat of Syrian refugee men in relation to Islam

fundamentalism, terrorism, or the 'refugee crisis'. 'Signifiers of "Muslimness"', such as clothing choice, skin colour and facial hair, can lead to experiences of marginalisation or exclusion (Hopkins 2004, 260). It is under these specific consequences that the respondents develop coping strategies to handle perceived racialisation of physical attributes. For example, younger men in this study often seem to use their physical capital to legitimise a different look (Shilling 2003); they overtly assert their 'Arabness' by maintaining Middle-Eastern hairstyles and beards in public spaces where whiteness is the norm. These observations resemble Barber's work on Vietnamese men in London as they mould stereotypes to 'mitigate the negative effects of societal structures and processes' (2015, 451). Similarly, respondents in the younger age group, empowered by employment and social status, actively seem to challenge white embodiment in the Northern Netherlands.

It is interesting how body management illustrates the different life worlds between the two age groups in the Netherlands and how being marked as 'other' is dealt with in a different way. To camouflage economic hardship in front of family and friends, Ghannam (2013) notes men in the Middle East sometimes engage in grooming practices to uphold a deceptive outward appearance. These same practices, however, play out differently in the Dutch context as growing a beard, for example, does not help to blend in. Hamzah (31), one of the older respondents, experienced racism based on his physical appearance in his efforts to find employment. He mentions: 'I had a beard, do you remember? […] When I had a beard, people were frightened. Me. dark skin, a beard. yes, let's say I had a different style'. Without the confidence derived from employment and perceived social status, and without being able to compensate for a 'different style' by means of physical capital, older respondents seem more inclined to 'conform' than those in the younger age group. Still, in both age groups, race seemed to become more prominent in the respondents' identities due to experiences of everyday racism.

In this section, we have illustrated how Syrian men between nineteen and twenty-five years old shape and negotiate constructions of masculinities, and highlighted differences compared to older respondents in the first section. The local opportunities and obstacles in relation to labour market access, have led them to different constructions of hegemonic masculinity and male respectability. In the final section, then, we further work out the interplay between age, (un)employment and Syrian masculinities in forced displacement by contrasting experiences between different age groups in relation to perceived life course disruption as a consequence of the civil war.

'You have to marry, I want to see your marry!'

The previous two sections revealed different Syrian refugee masculinities, produced and maintained through intersections of age, race, religion and social

class. Analysing different age groups, we have illustrated how hegemonic masculinities are constructed, redefined and challenged in relation to employment, social status and embodied integrity. This section builds on this age division by exploring how different masculinities between older and younger Syrian men are renegotiated and challenged in the broader context of gender- and generational relations (see also Hopkins 2006). We argue that unemployment and status loss are experienced as a double burden by older respondents as these prevent them from finding momentum to advance in their life course. The younger men, then, seem to be challenged in their ideas of hegemonic masculinities as they hold on to more traditional ideas about being man, reinforced by having obtained paid work and status in the Netherlands.

The masculinities of the Syrian men in our study are further influenced by romantic and familial relationships. In relation to femininities, studies illustrate men frequently turn to stereotypical constructions or performances of masculinities as they perceive their masculinities threatened (Nayak 2006; McDowell 2002b). Particularly in relation to Muslim young men, Hopkins (2006) describes the significance of paid labour as it allows men to maintain masculine identities of being a family breadwinner, even though they are not the main earner. Respondents in our study, too, often refer to more traditional forms of masculinities, developed throughout their individual life trajectories, to strengthen their threatened masculine identity in the Netherlands. Hamzah mentions,

> I used to have a relationship with a Dutch woman, we were quite serious. But when my work was stopped and I got social security benefits again, I was really upset […] That's why I quit the relationship. I said to her 'I am going to do my best, but without work I cannot have a relationship with you'. (Hamzah, 31, single, master's degree)

The quote suggests Hamzah, at the moment, prefers a relationship in which he can exert masculinity through providing financial security for his family members. In the life-course paradigm, the principle of accentuation tells us previously adopted behavioural patterns can surface more clearly as a consequence of societal change (Wingens et al. 2011). The perceived rejection as a refugee in the Netherlands, which manifests in unemployment and status loss, seems to maintain and accentuate more traditional views on gender relations among older respondents (see also Suerbaum 2018). Although Hamzah developed more nuanced ideas on gender relations in his life trajectory, and liberal norms, values and attitudes would often emerge throughout the interview, it seems that in the Netherlands 'the sound of the old patriarch's voice' is still embedded in his reasoning of what is expected of men (Darvishpour 2002, 283). More liberal and egalitarian attitudes of respondents seem to stand or fall on finding employment and maintaining their social positions. For the older men in this study, it seems hard to maintain such principles, principles developed in Syria, if one's priority is to find work.

Different mechanisms seem to be in place for younger respondents in this study, despite expressing more traditional views on gender- and partner roles as well. In part this might be ascribed to young age and the absence of educational opportunities as described above, but the data suggest these values are maintained and reinforced by legitimising a self-claimed breadwinner role by means of paid labour (Hopkins 2006; McDowell 2002b). Syad (23), for example, grew up in a middle-class family in Damascus, raised by two working parents who shared tasks in the household. During the war, he started working at a young age to provide financial support for his family. Now that he earns an income in the Netherlands and is able to provide, he does not seem to develop similar ideas on gender- and partner roles. He says,

> But when I am back home, you should be ready taking care of the house, that it is clean and there is food for us to eat. Everything should be organised […] This is what women need to do in our life. Okay, I am working to take care of you. You don't need to work, so stay home and enjoy yourself. (Syad, 23, single, basic education)

In line with Hopkins' studies on young Muslim men in Scotland, younger respondents seem to experience home merely as 'a site for consumption and relaxation' (2006, 340). The home space, and household roles and tasks appear to be highly gendered. This seems even more pronounced in forced displacement as gender relations and hegemonic masculinities are subject to rupture and change in a new host-country. Indeed, Suerbaum (2018) argues men in displacement gravitate towards norms, values and traditions they are already familiar with, and use and perform constructions of masculinities appropriate in their pre-migration context to strengthen their masculine identities in the Netherlands.

The masculinities of our participants are further intertwined with life course advancement and socialised concepts of family life (see also Mohammad 1999; Hopkins 2006). Men in our study, the older generation of respondents in particular, cannot conform to the discursive life paths they would probably have followed in Syria if it was not for the war. At times they feel pressured by family members that confront them with questions on marriage, family planning, and sometimes financial care. As mentioned above, many respondents articulate concerns about becoming a suitable marriage partner and highlight the role of family in finding a suitable partner (see also Suerbaum 2018). Feeling the weight of familial expectations on their shoulders, they often interpret this as de-masculinising. Wasim (31) explains,

> Now I'm here, it is difficult to marry. I suffer from this, not because of myself, but because of other people. Everyone is asking me 'why I don't have a wife, no children. You are 31, in our culture this is too late to get married. You *need* to get married!' As we say in Syria, you are going to miss the train. No girl for you […] for me this isn't an issue, you know. I am happy to be alone. Well, maybe not

happy, I'm fine with it. It's the questions of other people, also my family, my father and my mother. 'You have to marry, I want to see you marry'. But here in the Netherlands, this is not an option for us yet. (Wasim, 31, single, master's degree)

This part of the paper has sought to compare and contrast the different generational narratives of our respondents in relation to femininities and familial expectations. Feeling threatened in their masculinities because of unemployment, status loss and expectations of family members, the older men in this study seem to hold on to traditional constructions in relation to femininities to maintain their sense of masculinity. Younger respondents on the other hand feel strengthened as pre-migration notions of breadwinner masculinities are reinforced through paid work and job status in the Netherlands, legitimising more traditional views on gender divisions.

Conclusion and discussion

Without claiming to definitely represent Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands, this paper offers a channel for voices often marginalised in migration literature (Charsley and Wray 2015; Donaldson and Howson 2009; Hopkins 2006; Suerbaum 2018). It explored if and how the masculinities of Syrian refugee men in the Netherlands have changed in the context of forced migration. Our findings demonstrate masculinities are constructed in relation to the disruptive events of war, the specific economic and institutional opportunities and challenges of the host society, and the norms, traditions and expectations interlaced with the respondents' personal biographies. We have suggested multiple constructions of Syrian refugee masculinities divided by conflict as the war has marked respondents in their early twenties differently than older men in this study. Furthermore, we have identified underlying power relations as these masculinities are defined in relation to other social positions such as age, gender, race, religion and social class. By focusing on the Netherlands, the paper contributes to the masculinities literature by highlighting new contexts, new people and new configurations of being man.

The paper further touches upon experiences of everyday- and institutional racism. In Dutch public discourse, not in particular in debates on migration and integration, discussions on racism have systematically been dismissed as any notion of the term is deemed inappropriate in the anti-racism paradigm within post-war Netherlands (Siebers 2017). Ghorashi (2014), however, observes a racial hierarchy between first and second order citizenship in the Netherlands, which gradually culminated in present day processes of marginalisation such as Islamophobia. She argues Muslim migrants have never been seen as an integral part of Dutch society, but the Dutch integration debate treats race and racism as being less significant than it is or might have been, despite structural exclusion of Muslims in, for example, the Dutch labour

market (see also Siebers 2017). In line with other studies on Muslim masculinities and geographies of everyday racism (Gökariksel and Secor 2017; Hopkins 2007), this paper therefore advocates further research in the Netherlands on labour market exclusion of refugees alongside intersections of gender, race and religion.

Finally, this work provides insights into the relationships between masculinities, integration and space. The trajectories of becoming man are ambiguous, contradictory and are dependent on local challenges and opportunities (see also Ghannam 2013; Ward et al. 2017). Stripped from privileges acquired through citizenship, social class and patriarchy, this study emphasises post-stressors of the forced migration event tend to accentuate what men already know, i.e. constructions of masculinities and hegemony developed in the country of origin. As of January 2021, the Dutch government introduces a new Civic Integration Law to facilitate more efficient (local) labour market integration of refugees. It however does not seem to consider any protocol or procedures that give care to the experiences of frustrations, injustice and stress brought forward in this study.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

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